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The influence of teachers' backgrounds on their perceptions of musical creativity. A qualitative study with secondary school music teachersⁱ

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between six secondary school teachers' backgrounds and their perceptions of musical creativity. A unit of work involving composition and improvisation activities with pupils aged 11-14 was videotaped for each teacher. Participants were invited to comment on the videotapes during interviews, which were subsequently analysed using content analysis with the assistance of the computer programme NVivo. Teachers were also asked to reflect on specific instances that had shaped the direction of their musical outlook by completing a Musical Career Path questionnaire. It was observed that their experiences fell into three strands, namely musical, teacher-education, and professional teaching. The influence of these strands on the teachers' thinking is discussed in four sections that refer to a four-fold framework outlined from the literature review: their perceptions of (a) creative pupils, (b) an environment that fosters creativity, (c) the creative process, and (d) creative musical products. Data analyses indicate that the most influential strand is 'musical'. Participants with composing experience and practical knowledge of different music styles were more articulate at describing the environment for creativity and how this might be assessed in pupils' work. Educational implications based on these findings are considered in the conclusion.

Introduction

'Creativity' is often referred to in two ways within music curricula texts: (a) the description of activities under the label of creativity, such as improvisation and composition, and (b) statements concerning the value of creativity as a desirable 'thinking style'ⁱⁱ. However, the term 'creativity' and how creativity might be identified are rarely examined. Research on teachers' perceptions of creativity points out that teachers of arts subjects commonly interpret creativity and its teaching in personal terms (Fryer & Collings, 1991).

This paper draws on a four-year investigation that focussed on the development of a detailed understanding of how six teachers in English secondary schools perceived creativity in music education (Odena Caballol, 2003)ⁱⁱⁱ. In this paper, which discusses previously unpublished data, the teachers' descriptions of their musical and professional backgrounds are analysed for the purpose of examining the following research question:

- In what ways do these teachers' musical and professional experiences influence their perceptions of creativity?

Methodology

The teachers and schools participating in the study were selected on the basis of their different backgrounds and socio-geographical situations. These were thought to be sufficiently diverse to correspond with what Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe as a "maximum variation" approach when deliberately selecting participants. All teachers were experienced and were willing to take part in the investigation. Participants were interviewed at the beginning and at the end of the project. Their classrooms were observed and videotaped for between three to five hours of teaching units involving composition and improvisation activities with students aged 11-14. During the final interviews, each teacher watched a selection of extracts of his/her lessons and discussed these with the first author. The extracts were the starting point and skeleton for the interviews or "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess, 1988). 220 pages of transcripts were analysed with the assistance of the computer programme NVivo (Gahan & Hannibal, 1998; Gibbs, 2002). Content analysis (Kvale, 1996; Weber, 1990) was undertaken with a process akin to the one described by Cooper and McIntyre (1993, p. 384) as "recursive comparative analysis", because the categorisation of the data was continually "tested and refined" until all categories were compared against all the teachers' responses. 87.2% of the transcripts were categorized in the analysis, i.e. 236,636 characters from a total of 271,438 that included the interviewer's questions and the teachers' responses. Two independent researchers who read randomly selected parts of the categorised interviews validated the analysis.

Teachers were also asked to complete a Musical-Career-Path response sheet (see Figure 1), derived from methods developed by Denicolo and Pope (1990) and Burnard (2000, 2005). Using an undulating path drawn on a single sheet, participants were asked to think back over their life experiences. They were invited to write down specific instances that they considered had influenced the direction of their musical and educational outlook. Teachers were not given instructions about when they were to begin in their lives, but all of them started with experiences from an early age. The open-ended nature of this technique had the added advantage of letting the teachers choose the experiences and periods of their lives that they wanted to highlight. By using this technique instead of asking the same battery of questions to all participants, the thread was maintained for both of the prime intentions of this type of research, namely the researchers' posture of "not knowing what is not known", suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1982, p. 235), and the intention to offer illustrative examples rather than generalising theories (Eisner, 1991).

Figure 1. Extract of Laura's Musical-Career-Path response sheet

Father was very musical. As a pianist we all sang along from as early an age as I can remember. With an Irish cultural background, music was regularly celebrated.

Church folk music and traditional church music was very influential during my childhood and adolescence, and I first began arrangements of hymns as a teenager.

My piano teacher of 10 years has been an enormous influence.

Auditioning for Performing Arts College at 16 years opened up doors to other styles and musicians.

With a degree in Music and Drama, and composition being a strong interest, using music technology as an instrument was very exciting (....)

In the next section, the backgrounds of the teachers are individually outlined. This method of presenting the participants has been adopted from Burnard (2000) who presents her data by introducing each one of the individuals under consideration separately, leaving the overall discussion for a later section. A similar procedure is adopted here. Following the reporting technique used by Cox (1999), the teachers' ideas have been incorporated in their own words as much as possible, using single quotation marks. Names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

The teachers' backgrounds

Patrick

Patrick had classical viola and piano training and played in several ensembles while still at school. He studied a music degree where he participated in 'lots of orchestral playing' and conducting. Patrick regarded his degree as 'conventional', pointing out that all the music was 'Western classical stuff', and described his background as 'performance and musical analysis'. The only composition that he 'ever did was a pastiche...of nineteenth century harmony and

counterpoint'. After graduating, he trained as a teacher and was 'introduced to many different styles of music'. He started teaching in an inner-city school. Years later, Patrick joined the school where he currently works as Head of Music. It is a comprehensive inner-city school for girls with a well-resourced Music Department which includes an orchestra, choirs and bands.

Emma

Her first experiences were singing 'with parents from the age of six'. She learned the piano and sang in church, but stopped her formal music training at the age of thirteen, choosing art instead of music at secondary school. Emma got involved with rock bands at College and wrote songs there, joined a rock band and toured Europe in her twenties. She worked with several pop and rock bands as singer and composer, and has worked in studios, recording and engineering. After returning to England, Emma studied a university Jazz course and then trained to be a music teacher. She taught full-time for some years, but then 'burned out' and now teaches part-time. She also started conducting choirs and became involved in a practitioners' network of world music *a cappella*. She is currently teaching in a comprehensive inner-city school for girls and taking vocal workshops as a freelance.

Laura

The first influential musical incidents of Laura's life were experienced whilst singing with her family. She began her first arrangements of songs as a teenager. She studied piano and became acquainted with different styles of music in her youth. Auditioning for a Performing Arts College when 16 'opened up doors to other styles and musicians'. She studied a Music and Drama degree, majoring in composition. After graduation Laura, worked abroad playing and teaching music and then returned to the UK to study teacher education formally. Following this she started working at the school where she now runs the Music Department. It is a relatively small department in a large multicultural comprehensive inner-city school in what is classified as an economically deprived area.

Helen

Helen's first music experiences date from her primary school, learning to play the recorder and the flute. She continued playing at secondary, also writing 'very short tunes for the flute'. In school she learned to play the cornet too, and taught music to fellow students. Subsequently she specialised in flute as part of her Music and Drama degree at university. Later Helen undertook a teacher-training course. In it she became acquainted with 'world music', but was not taught 'how to go about composing'. She teaches at a comprehensive school in a rural area, which has a well-resourced separate building for the Music Department.

Elaine

Elaine's first influential music experiences date from pre-school age with family members. Whilst being a student, she remembered being 'able to be successful in music without really trying'. She went to a music school where 'loving music was the norm' and then later realised

that ‘other people had a very different reality’. Elaine studied a Music degree at university, taking a ‘very traditional’ composition course where she did not do ‘original composition’. However, she felt ‘pretty much’ confident teaching composition activities. Elaine is currently the Head of Music at a comprehensive school in a rural area, which has a well-resourced Music Department in a separate building. The department also has several bands and choirs.

Sarah

An active young student, Sarah took up recorder, clarinet and cello before the age of eleven. As a teenager, she remembered being enrolled for a special music course as ‘a turning point’. She then studied a Music degree and continued to participate in ‘as many ensembles as possible’. During that time she started teaching in two schools. After her degree she studied for a teacher education course, which she found to be ‘academically stimulating’, but with ‘uninspiring low musical standards’. During her first teaching post she joined a local choir and started teaching herself the violin. Sarah is currently the Head of a middle-size Music Department at a comprehensive school on the UK’s South coast. She plays in an orchestra on a weekly basis and undertakes occasional ‘gig’ work with a variety of choirs, orchestras and local jazz ensembles.

Discussion

There were several recurrent themes or similar types of experiences that were seen to be particularly generative of these teachers’ views of what influenced their career paths. For example, there was an expressed wish to teach from an early age and significant memories of musical experiences with family members during childhood. Even though there were patterns in all participants’ backgrounds, the relationship between these and their perceptions of creativity is not immediately obvious. However, analyses using NVivo reveal that some of the teachers’ experiences appear to have influenced their views of creativity. After examining the Musical-Career-Paths and the interviews, which were both equally important in providing data, it emerges that these teachers’ experiences can be summarised as falling within three strands:

- The *musical strand*, which refers to the teachers’ past and present musical experiences, including their school and undergraduate education, and any musical activities undertaken in addition to teaching;
- The *teacher-education strand*, which refers to the participants’ comments regarding their teacher-education courses;
- And the *professional teaching strand* that includes their teaching experiences in their current and previous schools.

Nevertheless, these strands cannot be completely separated. The significance of the strands on the teachers’ perceptions is discussed in the following four sections. They refer to the four-fold framework outlined from the literature review (see Beetlestone, 1998; Brinkman, 1999; Burnard and Younker, 2002; Craft, 2001; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; De Souza Fleith *et al.*, 2000; Hickey, 2002; Kennedy, 1999), related to their perceptions of (a) creative pupils, (b) an environment that fosters creativity, (c) the creative process, and (d) creative musical products.

a) Teachers' perceptions of creative pupils

Both the professional teaching and the music strands appear to have had a significant effect on these teachers' views. The participants' music strand experiences influenced their views regarding different types of creative pupils. For instance, Emma acknowledged different 'ways' in which pupils may develop their creativity. She observed that some pupils are 'very extrovert' and 'tend to get into trouble in lots of places within the curriculum'. A lot of these students 'are very creative and what happens in a very formal' education is that their 'creativity doesn't really get a place to flourish'. Emma described herself as being extrovert and a bit problematic when she was an adolescent, and felt that she could recognise this type of pupil because of her own schooling:

Those are the kids that I have my eye on because I was a bit like that myself...but then I am not having anything against the kids who are very creative and introvert as well...Both [types] have to be nurtured.

Examples of the importance of the professional teaching strand can be seen in the comments by Laura and Patrick regarding the perceived cause-effect link between creative pupils and their families. Laura, who is teaching students with a wide range of family incomes in a school with shortages of staff and resources in a deprived area, remarked that the pupils' home background has a 'large effect' on what they 'come out with'. In contrast, Patrick, who is teaching students with similar backgrounds in a relatively affluent city area, concluded that a musical family background is not a condition for musically able students. The teachers' experiences regarding their teacher-education courses did not emerge as an important factor affecting their perceptions of creative pupils.

b) Teachers' views on an appropriate environment for the fostering of creativity

Regarding the environment for creativity, it is the musical strand that emerges as the most influential on the teachers' views. It becomes apparent that having experiences with a variety of music styles and activities, including composition, helped Laura, Emma and Sarah to describe perceived features of an appropriate environment for creativity. These teachers keenly put forward comments regarding the factors that might hinder this environment. For instance, 'anxiety' due to exams or preparation of concerts and 'lack of time' due to the compartmentalisation of the school timetable within slots, would distort or even break the appropriate 'emotional environment' for creativity. They also commented on factors that facilitate such an environment (e.g. pupils' motivation). They were able to acknowledge all of these conditions and act upon them.

Participants with less experience in composing and improvising did not comment on these issues to the same extent. For example Patrick, who did not compose 'at all', focused his comments regarding the environment for creativity on having a good physical setting - 'I give [the pupils] instruments and space...and then the creativity will grow'.

The teacher-education experiences, although acknowledged as helpful by two teachers, did not emerge as having a major impact on their thoughts. They commented on being introduced during their teacher-education to ‘different styles of music’, but at the same time regretted not being ‘taught very well how to compose’.

c) The teachers’ perceptions of the creative process

Analysis revealed that two of the teachers with composing experience (Laura and Emma) presented views of the process of creativity that could be described as more ‘open’ than the other teachers. For instance, whereas Patrick stated that he followed a structured approach when teaching improvisation, Emma and Laura were sceptical of outlining a universal and rigid staging in the creative process. Emma (who was videotaped during a pop-song group composition project) explained:

Every group goes into different stages...some get it straight away and for some groups it takes a few weeks of struggling and then it comes through.

The examples commented by these teachers were in keeping with the suggestions by Green (1990, 2000 and 2001) that young people engage with a variety of processes depending on their experience and the music style of the piece.

The teacher-education and professional teaching strands did not appear to affect these teachers’ perceptions of the creative process. There is no indication that during the course of their training these teachers attended lectures on ‘creativity’. When comments were put forward, their experiences often focussed around workshop activities, ‘to get the classically trained set of people into improvising’ (Helen).

d) Teachers’ perceptions of creative products

Participants with a variety of experiences with different music styles were more prepared to accept as ‘creative products’ the work by pupils who did not necessarily keep to the style or the structure of the activity originally given by the teacher. For example, Emma and Sarah commented that one of their aims during their composition projects was to get the pupils to work with ‘their own’ music.

The professional teaching and the teacher-education strands again did not seem to influence their perception of these issues. Although participants commented on their teacher-education courses and pointed out good experiences and minor complaints, these courses did not appear to have a significant effect on their perceptions of creative products. However, participants perceived an improvement in their own creative products due to their professional teaching experiences working with youngsters. They mentioned getting ‘a lot from the pupils’, and pointed out benefits in their own composing skills ‘through the teaching’ done.

Conclusion

The three strands in the participants' backgrounds were unevenly represented due to the weighting of the musical strand, which was the most influential. Participants with composing experience and practical knowledge of different music styles were more articulate at describing the environment for creativity and the assessment of the pupils' work. Taking this into account, it would appear that beginner teachers need opportunities to work creatively in different musical styles during teacher-education and continuing education courses. Barrett (2006), in a study of a composer's teaching practices when working with a tertiary-level student, suggests that the teaching and learning process in composition may be a form of creative collaboration. Further enquiries may benefit from exploring the value of providing opportunities for collaborative work between secondary school beginner teachers and professional composers. This investigation corroborates suggestions by Alston (1980) and Pilsbury and Alston (1996) that point to a need for teachers to have appropriate composing experience if they are to be more able to assess musical compositions from a wide range of styles. This is necessary not only for the assessment of the final music products but, as Berkley (2001) points out, for the teachers to engage with the pupils' composing processes.

Nevertheless, the purpose of this investigation was not to seek for generalisations, but to try to accomplish a deeper understanding of the issues under enquiry. The methodology helped to illustrate particular cases with "thick descriptions" rather than generalised statements (Lamont, 2002). This study is an insight into the views of these teachers over a limited period of time. Paraphrasing Denicolo and Pope (1990), the teacher's mind is like a string made up of many filaments which if cut across may give a false impression. The filaments have to be followed over time to gain insight into the structure of the string. It would be interesting to repeat the same study in ten years time to explore the evolution of the participants' views.

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ⁱ This paper was an invited presentation to the 21st ISME Research Commission Seminar in Bali, Indonesia, 9-14 July 2006 (Price [ed], 2006).

ⁱⁱ Examples of this duality are evidenced in the curriculum in Catalonia, Spain (Generalitat de Catalunya, 1992), and the National Curriculum for England and Wales (DfEE & QCA, 1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Odena (2001a & b) for a relevant literature review and a methodology pilot. For a discussion of questions regarding how the participants characterised creativity in their discourse and the differences of their perceptions compared with the literature see Odena, Plummeridge and Welch (2005). Other aspects have been analysed from a Spanish perspective in Odena (2005a & b). Issues regarding the video techniques employed in the study and the dissemination of the research to different audiences have also been discussed (Odena, 2002, 2004).